



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

Supporting educators who are interested in increasing their skills and capacity to have dialogues about race is an important step toward more equitable professional learning systems and schools.

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IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

Conversations about race are increasingly at the forefront of debates about education, teaching, learning, and how to achieve excellent outcomes for each adult and student in a successful learning system. Research is emerging about the benefits of building the capacity of educators to engage in conversations about race and identity, amongst themselves and with students. Substantive discussions about race in the classroom have been shown to improve students' relationships with other students, their perceptions of races other than their own, and their own ability to talk about racial and cultural issues (Milner, 2017). Acknowledging race and culture contributes to students feeling accepted and valued as learners. And, engaging in conversations with students and colleagues about race — their own or in



general — expands teachers' knowledge and beliefs, which can in turn shift their teaching practices to be more responsive and inclusive (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

For educators to engage in these conversations, they must not only believe that conversations related to race are important and feasible, but they must have the skills, mindsets, and confidence to engage in those conversations. Research shows that many educators feel ill-equipped or hesitant to facilitate conversations about race, even when they believe it's important to do so, with white educators being particularly avoidant.

A recent study by Tropp and Rucinski (2022) sought to better understand the connections between teachers' beliefs and skills and their confidence and intentions about engaging in conversations about race. The study highlights two specific aspects of teachers' mindsets — implicit bias and concerns about appearing racist — both of which can act as psychological barriers to teachers engaging in conversations or practices related to race in their classrooms. Although there are situations in which teachers are prevented from discussing race due to local political contexts, this study specifically addresses factors that hinder teachers who recognize the benefit of discussing race in schools and would like to do so. Supporting educators who are interested in increasing their skills and capacity to have dialogues about race is an

important step toward more equitable professional learning systems and schools.

Recognizing professional learning as a way to address the potential barriers and build capacity for race conversations, the researchers also considered strategies that can support and empower teachers to engage in conversations about race in their classrooms and schools.

► THE STUDY

Tropp, L.R. & Rucinski, C.L. (2022, July 5). How implicit racial bias and concern about appearing racist shape K-12 teachers' race talk with students. *Social Psychology of Education*, 25, 697-717. doi. org/10.1007/s11218-022-09715-5

► METHODOLOGY

The study looked at two factors that may affect whether teachers intend to have conversations about race and how confident they feel about facilitating those conversations: implicit racial bias and concern about appearing racist.

Implicit racial bias is defined as the unconscious associations people hold about certain racial groups, and previous research finds that it can impact teachers' disciplinary practices and instructional practices, and therefore student outcomes. In this study, teachers' implicit racial bias was assessed using the Implicit Association Test hosted by Project Implicit. The Race Implicit Association Test measures bias by asking participants to sort stimuli and seeing how quickly and accurately they sort images of Black and white faces and positive and negative words. (This test and

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a number of others related to other categories and factors are available free at implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/)

The researchers defined concern about appearing racist as teachers feeling awkward about openly discussing race and racism in the classroom and worrying that their intentions would be misconstrued or misunderstood. They measured it using three survey questions designed for this study based on focus groups with teachers.

The study included other related self-report measures as controls, such as social desirability, motives for wanting to behave in unbiased ways, perceived support from the schools, and prior diversity training.

The researchers acknowledge that other contextual factors, such as grade level, the socioeconomic makeup of the school, and years of teaching experience, also factor into teachers' approaches to race talks, but their aim was to better understand the influence of teacher mindsets.

The researchers examined the relationships among these variables in two different samples: a national sample of 1,300 K-12 teachers who had engaged with materials from Learning for Justice (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center) and Perception Institute and 1,000 K-12 teachers from a large urban school district. The first sample was 70% white, 7% Black, 5% Latinx, 5% multiracial, and 2% Asian, with 12% of respondents not reporting their race; the second sample was 50% white, 10% Black, 8% Latinx, 5% Asian, 3% multiracial, 1% other, and 23% not responding. Although the teachers were racially diverse, the bias measures in this study were related to attitudes about white and Black people.

► FINDINGS

The researchers found both implicit racial biases and concerns about appearing racist play meaningful roles in influencing teachers' approaches to talking about race, but those roles differ.

Across both samples, teachers with higher implicit pro-white/anti-Black biases reported lower intentions to engage in race-related discussions with students. This held true even when teachers were internally motivated to be unbiased (that is, when they said that being unbiased is an important personal value) and when they were externally motivated to be unbiased (that is, when they reported that they did not wish to be seen as biased).

However, implicit racial bias was not related to teachers' feelings of confidence in their ability to facilitate race conversations. This is an interesting, and potentially troubling,

finding because, as the researchers acknowledge, implicit biases might very well impact the content and quality of race conversations, yet teachers may not recognize it.

In contrast, concern about being perceived as racist was related to both intentions and confidence about engaging in race conversations. It's notable that this is more of a factor in teachers' confidence than implicit bias is, though perhaps not surprising, because concerns about how one is perceived are conscious and explicit, whereas implicit bias occurs largely subconsciously.

One limitation of the study is that the findings rely on self-report measures, although the researchers sought to control for factors that might have biased the teachers' reporting of their intentions and confidence with regard to talking about race (such as how they felt about admitting mistakes). In addition, the bias measures were only related to Black/white perceptions, meaning that there were no measures and therefore findings or learnings related to other races and cultures.

► IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

These findings are helpful for thinking about the design, planning, and evaluation of professional learning. The researchers point out that there are multiple ways professional learning

can be helpful in supporting educators to talk about race, including: explicitly examine feelings related to how important race talks are, discuss fears of engaging unsuccessfully, and address concerns about bringing up race in a constructive way.

They also make a valuable distinction between addressing relational concerns and addressing the content and facilitation skills needed to be successful in race conversations. Professional learning to build educators' capacity to successfully facilitate conversations about race needs a defined intended outcome focused on mindsets or skills and knowledge to talk about race in a respectful and productive way.

This study speaks to several Standards for Professional Learning, including all three equity standards — **Equity Practices**, in its attention to the classroom interaction and teacher-student relationship level; **Equity Drivers**, with its focus on professional learning content and access and call for educators to identify and address their own biases and beliefs; and **Equity Foundations**, because of the discussion of school contexts and supports for building educator capacity to engage in conversations about race. The **Equity Drivers** standard in particular invites educators to examine how our own mindsets and backgrounds impact the assumptions we make when entering into conversations with colleagues

and students, especially conversations about race and equity, and to “seek out discussions with colleagues and students to learn more about the ways in which their identity has impacted their own learning” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 35).

This research also illustrates a key sentence in the **Learning Designs** standard: “Learning designers understand how beliefs, mindsets, and practices change, as well as what educator practices are likely to be influenced by professional learning” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 45). Understanding the specific learning goal to increase educators' abilities to start and facilitate race conversations, and then planning the professional learning accordingly, can increase educators' capacity and willingness to engage in these important, relationship-building conversations with students and colleagues.

REFERENCES

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